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ABSTRACT

This report describes the physical and educational transformation of South East Essex College of Arts and Technology in England. It focuses on how the institution's two seedy, dilapidated council buildings from the 1940s have been renovated and remodeled in pursuit of a modern aesthetic work environment for students, faculty, and staff. The report discusses the factors affecting change and modernization among further education colleges in general and South East Essex in particular. A report from the college's principal, Tony Pitcher, "Building Blocks To Transform Learning," includes discussion on early impressions and ideas, culture change and physical change, problems, the American community college example, tackling the traditional, growth and innovation, library to learning centers, information technology (IT) centers, security consistency and synergy, and a variety of learning methods. The report also discusses student, faculty, and administrator attitudes toward the changes. (MDM)

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Altered images:

transforming college estates for a learning revolution

- The metamorphosis of South East Essex College
- Creating a whole college corporate image
- Open working – the walls come tumbling down

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Innovations in FE
Spring 1995

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Issue 2 Spring 1995

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Foreword

Ernest Theodossin
Further Education
Development Agency

Even those of us who have been in education for possibly more years than we like to remember cannot easily recall a time when 'dramatic change' was not allegedly a part of the scene, when alumni were not meant to find tomorrow's college unrecognisable. In more cynical moments it is difficult to avoid wondering whether these changes are not about travelling rather than arriving. 'New' as a label seems to be attached to education more frequently than to soap powders, and with similar results. The explanation must lie in the fact that so many educational changes are political rather than substantive, transcendental instead of empirical – they may make an enormous difference to what are known as key stakeholders (or staff) but virtually none to customers. Modifications such as the new name, the expensive new logo, the redesigned stationery and the incredibly exciting new management structure can still leave the public referring to the college as 'the tech up the road'.

It is therefore pleasurable to be able to devote this issue of **Innovations in FE** to the achievements of a college which has made real changes to its curriculum portfolio, delivery mode, physical plant and working practices. These are changes which are manifested in dramatic visual alterations. Two seedy, slovenly council buildings dating from the 1940s and 1950s have been renovated, remodelled, refurbished, redecorated and refurnished in the pursuit of a clean, bright and colourful 1990s working environment in which new things are happening in ways so unfamiliar that no student can fail to perceive the transformations.

South East Essex College of Arts and Technology has thus achieved a new corporate image that extends beyond the chief executive's office and printed materials. That does not of course imply that all of the college's users view the changes with approbation, or that detractors cannot be found, but it does mean that even the most casual visitor to the college cannot fail to notice that this time the old tech has been replaced by something exceptionally different for customers. If not a first for education, that must be at least comparatively rare.

The ugly duckling transformed

Ernest Theodossin

Whatever else one may feel about further education (FE), the physical world it inhabits can seldom arouse anything other than a limited range of reactions. Think, for example, of the typical British FE college purely as workplace accommodation: what words and phrases spring to mind in attempting to describe it? Tacky, dirty, tatty, cluttered, matchstick furniture, down-market, cheap, shoddy, ugly, unwashed windows, faded curtains . . .

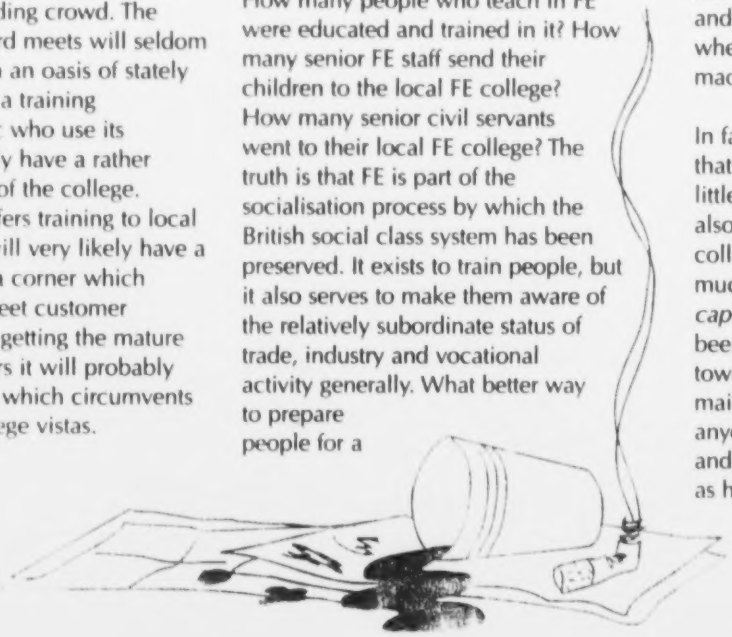
If asked to demonstrate to visitors from developing countries the achievements of one of the world's oldest democracies, the cradle of the industrial revolution and one of the leading European powers, how many of us would head for the nearest FE college? In the United States, on the other hand, one might well turn to the local community college. In the major Australian cities the equivalent TAFE (technical and further education) college might well reveal the best of late twentieth-century architecture. In Germany, Holland and Denmark vocational colleges might not achieve quite that distinction, but they would certainly impress as professional work environments. In Britain however . . .

Of course there are exceptions in this sceptred isle, both in terms of whole colleges and almost certainly within any one college. The chief executive officer's study will surely provide striking contrasts – almost always a calm, clean haven from the madding crowd. The room where the board meets will seldom be anything less than an oasis of stately prosperity. If there is a training restaurant, the public who use its services will generally have a rather different impression of the college. When the college offers training to local business people, it will very likely have a wing, an annexe or a corner which makes an effort to meet customer expectations, and in getting the mature trainees to the trainers it will probably designate a pathway which circumvents the more sordid college vistas.

Learning to know one's place

Why is British FE so physically repellent? Why are the floors so littered, the ambience so threadbare, the levels of comfort and cleanliness so minimal? Why is signposting regarded as an optional extra? Why is there nowhere for the visitor to park (and why are the most convenient spaces reserved for senior staff)? Out of the classroom, why do lecturers appear to inhabit Miss Havisham's drawing room, surrounded by piles of papers and rubbish no one has used for years? Why are carpets such a rarity?

One explanation must be culture. How many people who teach in FE were educated and trained in it? How many senior FE staff send their children to the local FE college? How many senior civil servants went to their local FE college? The truth is that FE is part of the socialisation process by which the British social class system has been preserved. It exists to train people, but it also serves to make them aware of the relatively subordinate status of trade, industry and vocational activity generally. What better way to prepare people for a low status position in society generally than to accustom them to their destiny in substandard training surroundings?



Hence the absence of carpets, presumably on the assumption that FE students (whatever their age) will put out their cigarettes, spill their drinks or throw their crisp bags underfoot. The irony of course is that the same people who use the college also go into banks, public libraries, department stores, cinemas and theatres and other public buildings where quite different assumptions are made.

> "FE can break the spiral of deprivation only through its own efforts."

In fairness it has to be acknowledged that British FE colleges have had very little money spent on them, although it also needs to be recognised that the colleges have often acquiesced. For much of the past decade the cuts in *per capita* expenditure on education have been steered away from staff and towards the estate. Repairs and maintenance have not been high on anyone's task list, and interior decoration and landscape gardening have been seen as having little to do with education. In most places FE is so used to being poor that no one bothers to complain.

The point is illustrated most vividly with regard to space norms. When public sector higher education (HE) was incorporated it had to accept, depending on curriculum area, a maximum space norm of 15 square metres per student. When FE went corporate, overnight the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) drove the HE norm down to 10 square metres per student, presumably because anything more spacious would have involved treasury expenditure.

Moreover, as FEFC **Circular 93/35** (1993) makes clear, the 10 square metres does 'not constitute an automatic entitlement'. If FE feels cramped, the suggested solution is to lengthen the working day and/or the teaching year. By way of contrast, one should note that in Danish vocational colleges 10 square metres per student is the minimum norm and that subjects which in Britain qualify for 10 square metres receive 27 square metres in Denmark. Like low levels of self-esteem, low expectations are an intrinsic part of the British FE landscape.

Self-help as an alternative

What the above illustrates is that if FE wants to improve not merely its image but also its physical environment, to upgrade its accommodation and to enhance its working conditions, it cannot look to Government for help. The amount of annual capital funding available from FEFC for the entire sector is minuscule. We cannot expect that the chronic shortage of public money which has afflicted British education for the past 15 years will be sidestepped to find the cash necessary for developing FE college estates. Improving FE's physical plant must be at the bottom of every politician's wish list. FE can break the spiral of deprivation only through its own efforts.

South East Essex College

Carnarvon Road Centre (left) and London Road Centre (below)

One college which has succeeded in transforming its physical environment in a most spectacular fashion is South East Essex College of Arts and Technology, situated in Southend-on-Sea, Essex. This college has approximately 3,800 full-time students and 370 full-time staff; its annual turnover is around £13m and its average level of funding £17.08 per unit. In 1994–95 it was the 38th largest college in terms of funding units and the 48th largest in terms of funding generally. In the same academic session it had the 11th largest increase in funding (£1.78m).

In terms of its estate, South East Essex College started out with some advantages. It has two main buildings, less than a mile apart. Both buildings are sound, if dreary, local government constructions, but neither is a listed building, or located on top of a crumbling coal mine or situated on the periphery of the town where it can serve as a focus for vandalism by disgruntled youths – problems which afflict more than one FE college. South East Essex College consequently has advantages of omission, even if the estate exhibits few positive qualities.

It would be fairly accurate to describe its original appearance as something like the proverbial ugly duckling, and if it has not quite been metamorphosed into an elegant swan, it is not very far from such an achievement and closer to it than hundreds of other FE colleges. What makes South East Essex College's transformation remarkable and (in my experience) unique in the British FE sector resides in matters of scale and coherence of development. The essential features of the modified estate are as follows.

Openness

Most FE colleges can now boast a flexible/open learning/resource centre – what was known previously as the library. This denotes a large space where many people do many different things using many different artefacts. Since most older colleges were built to hold classes in rooms, theatres, workshops or laboratories, in order to create resource centres architects have usually had to remove the walls lining the corridors and dividing classrooms, resulting in a large

Carnarvon Road learning centre, showing square openings for borrowed light

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Teaching team room - media and performing arts

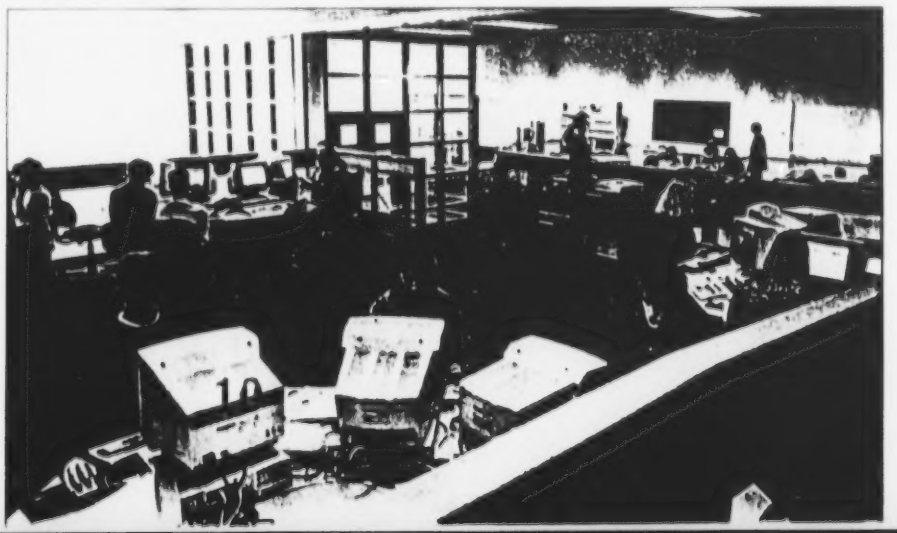
space with two lines of support columns down the centre. South East Essex College has several such open spaces, but its commitment to openness goes much further.

Although there are still many traditional classrooms in the college, there are also a great many more open spaces, e.g. learning centres and specialist IT centres which can hold up to five teaching groups. In the Carnarvon Road building, the flexible learning centre has a proscenium arch incorporated into the construction (it used to be the college hall). Part of the space encompasses two floors and part (where the windows are located) rises upwards without break. Large square holes have also been cut into many retaining walls to provide borrowed light. The overall space is extensive and varied enough to allow individuals and small groups to work in what feels like an envelope of isolation.

There are also large computer workshops with individual workstations. Those familiar with the 1960s and 70s primary school scene will recognise these developments as an extension of the open plan classroom devised to service the integrated curriculum.

At South East Essex College the openness is also something of a philosophical commitment to a way of organising a community. In large open spaces it is to some extent easier to lose oneself in a crowd. On the other hand, any deviation from behavioural norms immediately attracts attention. The openness is intended to alleviate discipline problems and, so far as one can determine, it succeeds, assisted by closed circuit television targeted at strategic points.

Window near reception at Carnarvon Road Centre

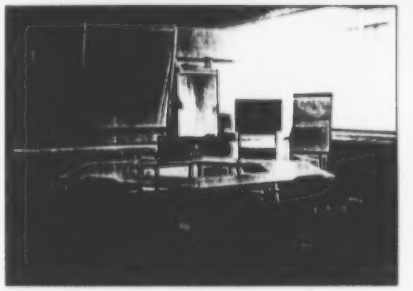


Learning centre - Carnarvon Road

Instead of functioning as streets which no one owns and no one feels responsible for, the corridors have been either incorporated into rooms or are treated as common space and decorated to look like an extension of the rooms.

All staff work in open spaces. Business support staff are located in large, open offices. Teaching staff have their desks in open spaces and even heads of team are expected to share the open areas with their colleagues. In these teacher spaces there are small rooms in the corner where private discussions can be held, and teachers can book a number of rooms in the college for larger meetings, but no one is allowed to create his or her own space as a demonstration of status or individuality. The offices have no filing cabinets: they create barriers to hide behind. Instead, staff use files and ring binders. The general impression is of working tidiness.

There are no common rooms in the traditional sense, either for students or staff. When people want to socialise and/or eat, they use the staff and student refectories. As the college is located in the town centre, there is access to a variety of local cafes and other eating/recreational venues; this is not an option for all colleges.



Meeting room, which staff can book

Perhaps the most remarkable demonstration of the openness is the fenestration: windows abound, in classroom walls, doors, all meeting rooms, even in the chief executive's office. Everyone can be seen and everyone can see what everyone else is doing. There is, as one slightly horrified visitor remarked, 'nowhere to hide'. To which one might respond, 'What do you want to hide?'

Consistency

The college has a corporate image. For most college managers that would mean a logo and matching stationery, prospectus and business cards. At South East Essex College it also

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Entrance to principal's office

means corporate colours: red, blue, grey and white. Everything (apart from plants) is one of these colours, and everything means just that: walls, carpets, box files and ring binders, chairs, wastepaper bins, tables, curtains, stair rails, radiators, etc. Everywhere in the college is visually in the same organisational world. The chosen colours are favourites with manufacturers of office supplies and furniture, so they are easily obtained and do not require additional expenditure. All rooms and offices, whether for support or teaching staff, are furnished to a similar standard. Unlike many organisations, furnishings are not used to denote status and separation. Everything looks as if it belongs to the same enterprise.

On entering the Principal's office it is immediately apparent that there is a degree of privacy which would not be automatically available elsewhere, but the office does not give an impression of representing an entirely different sphere of earthly existence – a feature common to many traditional principals' offices in FE colleges. Here the standard of furnishing is consistent with that throughout the college, and the differences derive from function rather than status.

Scale

Most colleges have isolated areas which are furnished to a high standard and are attractive, clean and inviting. Most colleges also have open areas and modern offices. As a frequent visitor to colleges I am accustomed to being shown the latest developments, but to reach them I usually walk through even larger expanses of undeveloped territory.

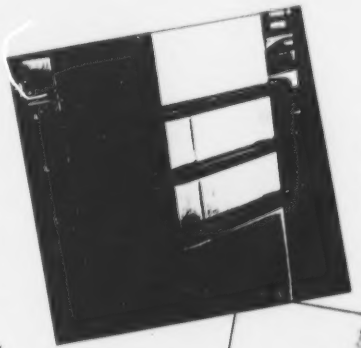
At South East Essex College the transformation has moved relentlessly through both main Centres, floor by floor and room by room. On my first visit I could see on a stairwell in the London Road building where the decorating had stopped: brightness on one side of the line, grime and dirt on the other – modernity vs. institutional gloom. Several months later I returned, hoping to organise 'before and after' photographs, but the whole stairwell had been transformed, as well as large areas beyond. The London Road Centre used to be the less-preferred site, but it is being upgraded to the same standard as the Carnarvon Road Centre.

At last sighting there were some corridors and rooms to which nothing much has been done for generations, but no doubt these too will be transformed within a short period of time. When I interviewed staff in the spring of 1994 the London Road Centre still had a staff common room, no less unattractive than most, and some of those I spoke to were no less committed to its preservation than staff elsewhere. I was, however, told that it would shortly disappear and be incorporated into the refectory; by the start of the 1994–95 session the change was complete.

The clear intention is to ensure that all of the college estate is developed. There are to be no showcase areas designed to impress visitors. Change is moving through the buildings, all 22,000 square

Seating section near entrance to principal's office

Waste bin



Protective tubing around supporting pillar

Unprotected pillar

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metres of them, relentlessly and determinedly. The old and tacky is disappearing. The bright and the new are surfacing everywhere. No details – potted plants, stair rails, structural column guards, signage – are too trivial to receive attention. The scale of the enterprise is staggering.

Finance section, Carnarvon Road Centre

Tone

The general impression is of a professional working environment. South East Essex College has moved into the business world to an extent most colleges have not yet contemplated. The whole operation looks and feels like a business. The white walls reflect light and create an impression of cleanliness. The reds are strong and assertive, and the blues and greys are colours associated with the conservative world of commerce. The atmosphere generated by the physical transformation conveys very clear messages to anyone who enters:

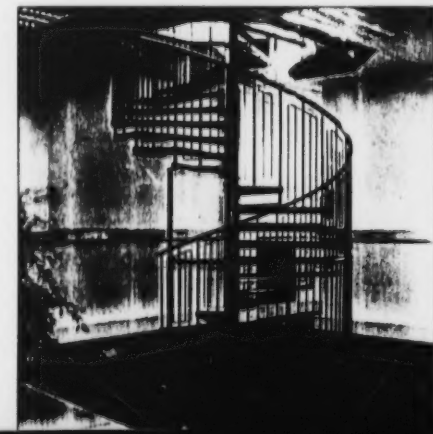
> This is a place of work, not play. We are goal orientated, achievement driven. We have values and standards. What you can and cannot do is constrained. Rowdy, uncivilised behaviour is not tolerated. We are in the business of education and training.

A bank or building society, estate agent or solicitor, financial consultant or accountant could move into the buildings and feel comfortable without major modifications – a characteristic few FE colleges could boast. At the same time the atmosphere is neither cold nor forbidding. Partly it is because the colours are bright, whatever the weather outside, and the indoor lighting is warm and welcoming. In addition, the abundant and healthy looking plants mitigate the sharp edges and lines of the walls, doors and openings. The overall impression made is that someone cares about appearance. In turn this generates the feeling that someone also cares about the visitor. Intentionally or sub-consciously most British FE colleges convey quite the reverse: you are a second-rate person entering a second-rate establishment. Have no delusions about either us or yourself. The South East Essex estate speaks the reverse: 'What we do is important. You are important.'

Yet whatever messages management may wish to deliver, people can circumvent them. If a college constructs an attractive reception area, what is there to prevent members of the public from accessing a building by other entrances? At all South East Essex College Centres, the solution has been to supervise the entrances to the buildings: back and side doors are available only as emergency exits. Staff, students and visitors come in via the main entrance only. This not only ensures that the designed message is delivered but helps with security as well.

Buildings are not the sole communicators. People convey messages as well, and initially those messages are delivered by appearance: clothing, grooming, cleanliness. The matter of what to wear to work, of dressing up and dressing down, is both complex and something of a minefield. I can think of no European or North American country where dress as a demonstration of social status is as important as it is in Britain. In France I have encountered bank clerks in jeans. In Denmark even high ranking male civil servants do not necessarily wear ties. In my experience, in Britain what you wear determines to an astonishing extent how you are treated. If you want to complain in person to a manager, how your message is received will depend initially on your appearance.

In FE colleges senior managers are usually expected to look different from lecturers, who have often taken a pride in not looking as if they work in industry or commerce. Many academics are notorious for dressing down. The message is unmistakable and it can be a



Spiral staircase in learning centre

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Windows in Kingswood House (leased building)

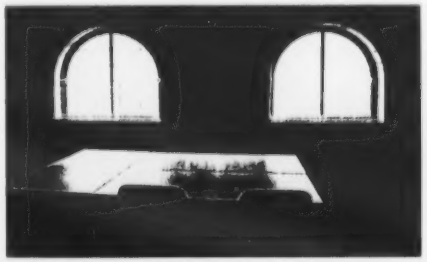
powerful way of communicating: 'I do not wish to be judged by my appearance. There is more to me as a person than the clothing I wear.' In some educational establishments new students can have problems in distinguishing between lecturers and other students.

At South East Essex College, unsurprisingly, the matter of work clothing has not been overlooked. There is in fact an official, explicit expectation of a good, professional standard of dress. This enhances, supports and underlines the professional image, the feeling of being in business premises. In the commercial world all of this would be commonplace. In education it can initially appear revolutionary, even shocking. There are the inevitable dissenters – as indeed there are wherever a dress code operates. It is noticeable, however, that they tend to be found in the more remote classrooms; front-of-house staff and managers have accepted that the business image extends to their wardrobes. The sartorial transformation seems to be continuing no less resolutely than that affecting the estate; doubtless it is assisted by the large number of relatively new staff recruited from the world of industry and commerce where business dressing is the norm.

How did it happen?

By now the reader may have begun to wonder whether the college I have been describing actually exists or is a figment of my imagination. Most colleges are struggling with the problem of doing more with less funding in general, and with the introduction of new contracts in particular. Even if a college could be entirely emptied of students for long periods to allow in workers, it would be difficult to effect such dramatic estates changes in a short period of time.

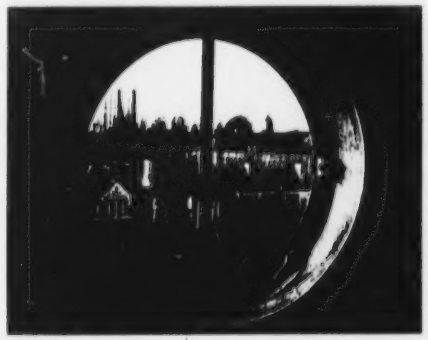
How has South East Essex College managed? To start with it has a very obvious driving force in its chief executive, Tony Pitcher. The changes have come top down and they have been management driven. They have also been imposed, resolutely and unashamedly. It is difficult to imagine any other approach which could make so striking an impact in so short a time. For example, would it ever be possible for 370 full-time college staff to agree which four colours should form the basis of the corporate image? How would consultation take place? Where would it occur? Would staff vote between colours? Would student representatives be involved? Who would resolve the traditional conflict between engineers and arts lecturers? Would dissenters be allowed their own colours? How long would all of this take? Even if decisions were finally taken, how many staff would remain devastated by green or demoralised by yellow?



The whole approach is light years away from what one usually encounters in the world (and not the business) of education. We have been taught to consult: 'ownership' is a traditional FE battle cry. However, management gurus and proselytising liberals have never been much interested in estates, the organisation of space, interior design, colours, plants, dress codes, etc. To make an impact on such areas takes vision, conviction, determination and access to appropriate resources. Many others have the means, but Tony Pitcher is exceptional in having used them. He has also been doing it since 1990, which means that the estates transformations predate incorporation and began to surface in the days of local authority control.

The renovation and development work did not spring fully formed from the start. Indeed, one of the earlier developments (the refurbishment of the training restaurant) is singularly unattractive, looking more like a time-warp survivor from the 1950s than a contemporary public venue, and is probably an inevitable consequence of local authority involvement. It is also fair to say that some of the earlier transformations, such as those involving computer workshops, are conspicuously less impressive than more recent additions. South East Essex College has learnt from its experience, an opportunity provided by incremental developments over a number of years.

Big-bang or piecemeal, whatever the approach to estates development and refurbishment, a college needs money to pay for the changes. Tony Pitcher's approach is one which I suspect no



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college eager to transform its estates in the next decade will be able to avoid. The salaries and wages bill has been driven down to below 60 per cent of the annual turnover. There are lecturers on the payroll, but the college also employs a range of learning support staff. A generous staff development programme encourages **all** employees to improve their skills further. Disillusioned traditionalists have been offered redundancy compensation or early retirement. Virtually all academic staff (no surprise) have accepted new contracts.

With the savings made, approximately eight per cent has been spent each year on developing the estate. South East Essex College's purposes have been clarified and promoted. For example, day release courses have virtually disappeared – the focus is now on recognised and relevant work-related programmes and high status professional qualifications. This strategy is obviously working; enrolments have risen significantly year-on-year, as have examination pass rates. The college now has a marketing director recruited from business. It had a qualified accountant on its staff prior to incorporation. The business approach is visible on all levels and in every direction.

Inevitably there has been dissent and disapproval. At one time Tony Pitcher was of considerable interest to the educational press, which noted that he had 'raised some hackles among the lecturers' and that the lecturers' union 'declared him an unenlightened despot' (FE Extra supplement, **Times Educational Supplement**, 15 October 1993). The kinds of changes South East Essex College has experienced in the past few years cannot be achieved with universal painlessness, and it is doubtful they could have been brought about within the timescale in any other ways than those Tony Pitcher has employed.

> "Improving the working environment is more than just cosmetic change: it is a necessary part of a larger commitment to improving quality for both staff and clients"

Nor should it be assumed that resolution in one direction precludes sensitivity to staff feelings or a lack of concern for professional development. On the positive side it should be noted that many staff feel extremely enthusiastic. Those employed at South East Essex College or in other colleges before the changes are aware that the work environment has been improved beyond anything anyone might have anticipated and that the changes have clearly helped with student recruitment and reduced student discipline problems. An attractive professional work space cannot but convey the message that those who work in it and use it are respected and valued.

Efforts have also been made to improve the staff situation in other ways. South East Essex College has moved from being a male dominated bastion (with only four of the top 50 posts held by women) to an institution in which women are represented at all levels of the organisation. This has involved the promotion of many younger staff members and has in turn occasioned a great deal of active support and loyalty by staff who would once have been overlooked.

Approximately two per cent of the annual budget is devoted to staff development: the improved physical environment is thus a repository for a no less determined effort to improve, update and upgrade staff capability. It is not surprising that South East Essex College should have received an Investors in People award. Improving the working environment is more than just cosmetic change: it is a necessary part of a larger commitment to improving quality for both staff and clients.

Front of Carnarvon Road Centre

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Building blocks to transform learning

Tony Pitcher, Principal,
South East Essex
College of Arts &
Technology

Early impressions and ideas

I took over as principal of what was then called Southend College in 1990. Before I took on my new management responsibilities, I was able to wander around observing the work of the College, asking questions, listening, and coming to some conclusions about the organisation whose future I was now to be responsible for. I recollect some of the scenes which left a marked impression on me and which were crying out for urgent attention: the large unsupervised entrance foyer dominated by drinks machines, litter and smoking students; the small window marked 'reception' with a pull-down blind superfluously marked 'closed'; the administrative offices hidden away, with the senior manager responsible equally hidden behind filing cabinets, coffee-making equipment and a solid closed door; teaching staff hidden around the College in numerous small cubbyholes.

In order to secure the development of the College and steer a course for the future, there were major issues to be addressed; we intended to establish a recognised strategic position for the College in the community. The priorities that I and the new management team determined to address were to:

- make the delivery of learning programmes student and customer focused;
- establish and re-define the image of the College in the community;
- improve the effectiveness of the administration and management of the College;

- release resources for these aims by operational effectiveness, efficiency and economy; and
- overcome the immediate barrier to growth by making better use of limited accommodation.

We also believed that college staff were entitled to a stimulating and high quality professional work environment in which they could achieve full effectiveness in their roles.

Culture change and physical change

Managers in education have been guilty of exhorting staff to change without giving them the wherewithal to do it. To provide substance, not just style, we have developed a strategy of supporting change by providing concrete, undeniable demonstrations of it through systematic and well-designed major modifications to the buildings. In four years we have completed 14 major internal building projects and many more smaller refurbishments of the working environment. In the same timescale we have improved the utilisation of the existing building stock to enable us to accommodate nearly 300 per cent more full-time students than in 1990.

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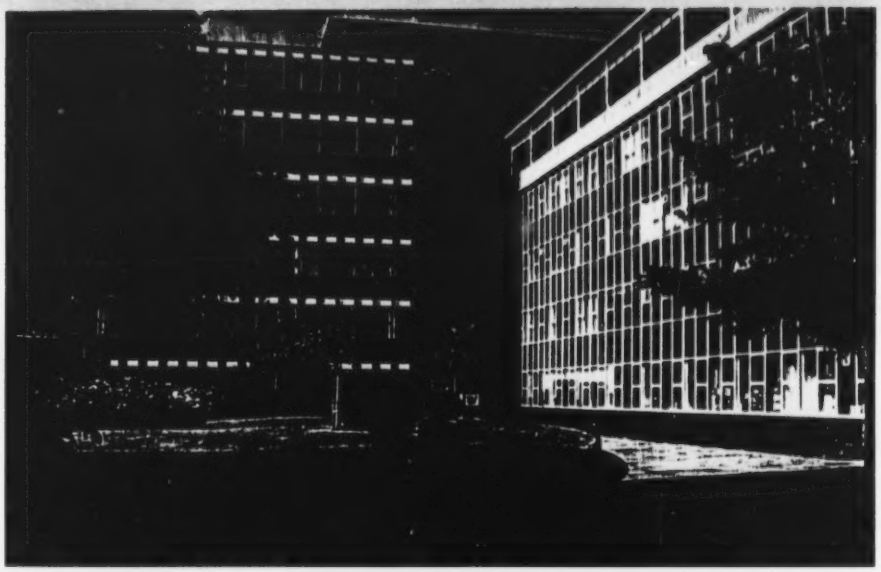
We tackled our agenda by practical problem-solving, 'disjointed incrementalism', making step changes and going with things that worked, doing them again bigger and better. It has led to marked changes in college culture and has had a profound, positive impact on the way staff and students work. Management and development of the buildings has established itself in managers' thinking, alongside human resource and financial management, as a key underpinning of the college's strategic development.



Carnarvon Road Centre

The problems

The college is located in the centre of the largest town in Essex, Southend-on-Sea, which is itself the centre of a large, suburban residential area. The educational environment is highly competitive. Within a few miles are four selective grammar schools, five more 11–18 schools, the second largest sixth form college in England and a number of effective private trainers.

In 1990 the college occupied two substantial buildings and two smaller ones. These were held without the benefit of any significant surrounding land (essentially only the footprint of the buildings). Any development in the short- or medium-term had to be on existing sites and could only be via internal restructuring. The two main buildings date from the late 1940s and 50s, and were essentially designed around corridors and classrooms. The long corridors were ill-lit and unsupervised; off them was a warren of private teaching and office spaces, hidden from view. This had produced the culture of the public street in the corridors, contrasting with defended personal territory in the private spaces behind. These were controlled individually by staff according to their own varied inclinations and interpretations of their professional responsibilities.

A feature of the college in 1990 was the virtual absence of information technology (IT) systems and equipment for management and administration. The clear and urgent necessity was to set up an IT network to provide college-wide information and enable effective management, administration and communications.

It was this pragmatic response to a problem, rather than any broader theoretical vision, that was the immediate trigger for change. The business support staff were scattered around the buildings in small offices according to historical accident rather than by design. It would not have been economical or efficient to install a network to link the existing offices, and it was only sensible to look for a larger, coherent location for a college management and administrative office. Non-teaching staff were also virtually non-persons in the minds of teaching staff. Putting them together, enabling them to work together and be accessible, would in due course make them a major force in the management of the college.

Another problem to be tackled at the earliest opportunity was the impression created by the college's entrances. The main entrances were customer unfriendly – hostile even – and gave the visitor or potential student little help in accessing the college for the first time, or in getting educational guidance. The numerous side entrances were convenient short cuts but gave rise to serious security problems, contributing to the defensive attitudes of staff.

The American community college example

A visit I made to Illinois Community Colleges in 1990 was a crucial source of inspiration. I was struck by how the internal architecture of the bigger and newer American colleges enabled staff and students to move into, around and through functional, inter-connecting business and student services spaces without the need for unsupervised corridors. Staff were visible and accessible. They worked in large spaces at desks or behind counters. Internal glazing visually linked adjacent spaces. Moving into these spaces prompted welcoming eye contacts, smiles and a helpful and efficient reaction from the college staff. It rewarded those with purposeful intentions and discouraged loitering or antisocial behaviour, and offered little encouragement to the person looking for casual, temporary shelter off the street.

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Interestingly, the architecture of openness was not usually continued into the learning spaces. The academic staff and learning styles culture was mainly traditional (small office and classroom based) and custodial.

Early improvements and a distinctive style

Bringing together essential management and administrative functions not only enabled us to move forward on introducing computer networks, it also gave us the opportunity to re-think the working environment for staff. At the same time we were actively working on organisational and cultural issues, promoting a 'one staff' philosophy, with everyone equally entitled to a quality working environment.

The first development was our integrated college administration centre. We annexed several classrooms and their adjacent corridor and recycled numerous small offices into smart new learning spaces. We removed internal walls to create an integrated, open plan, brightly lit and colourful office environment, with glass instead of plasterboard where internal walls were necessary. It was interesting that in the prevailing culture of private spaces and rights-of-way, the taking over of shabby classrooms and corridors provoked controversy while smart new classrooms

Personnel staff in cramped conditions before extension built – dividers now gone

created from old office spaces seemed to please very few.

On interior design issues, we established a style and standard which we have stuck to ever since. For no particular reason except an instinct to make a conspicuous visual statement about change, we chose bright primary colours – red and blue – for furniture, trims, fabrics, fittings and features, against a background of grey and white. Carpets, good, standard office furniture and new computers on virtually every desk, apart from being functional, made implicit statements about standards and expectations which soon had a direct impact on work practices, management effectiveness and business support staff self-esteem.

A less welcome effect of the initial process of raising standards was that the remainder of the college started to look more obviously shabby and unsatisfactory. On the positive side, the visible benefits built up pressure and impetus for further change, with staff accepting temporary disruption as a reasonable price to pay for a better working environment. However, for some staff the visible changes were the symbols of unwelcome interference with familiar organisational structures or informal networks, cosy work practices or traditional teaching styles. New carpets and plants were symbolic targets for complaints of extravagance and irrelevance. In reality, carpets are a relatively cheap floor covering to install and maintain, as well as looking good, reducing noise and discouraging antisocial behaviour. Plants with masses of green foliage also cost relatively little and soften and humanise work areas.

Tackling the traditional

Our other main building also got early attention in 1990. It was then occupied by the Departments of Engineering and Construction – 100 per cent male staffing. Built in the 1940s, it emanated industrial revolution and factory imagery. Paralysed by decades of struggle between the two departments, staff had retreated behind barricades of filing cabinets, into rabbit warrens of DIY cubicles and other small staff workrooms, offices and common rooms, finely differentiated by grade, status and function. There were no managers with college-wide responsibilities on this site.

Over the summer our building contractors moved in to simplify the architecture by removing a variety of unnecessary partitions and walls. Teaching staff returning in September were faced with large, single status staff workrooms cleanly restructured to match the organisational restructuring implemented at the same time.

This was just the start of a five-year programme of organisational development on that site. Real change in

Finance section, Carnarvon Road Centre

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underlying attitudes has been slow to become visible. More recently, we have transplanted some of the expanding work in graphic design, 3D design and fashion studies to take over redundant workshops. Once again the conversion of accommodation – this time of engineering workshops to provide a design centre shared by art and design, engineering and construction – is proving an influential factor in culture shift. The more varied mix of student and staff styles, supplemented by improved gender balance, has helped in this process.

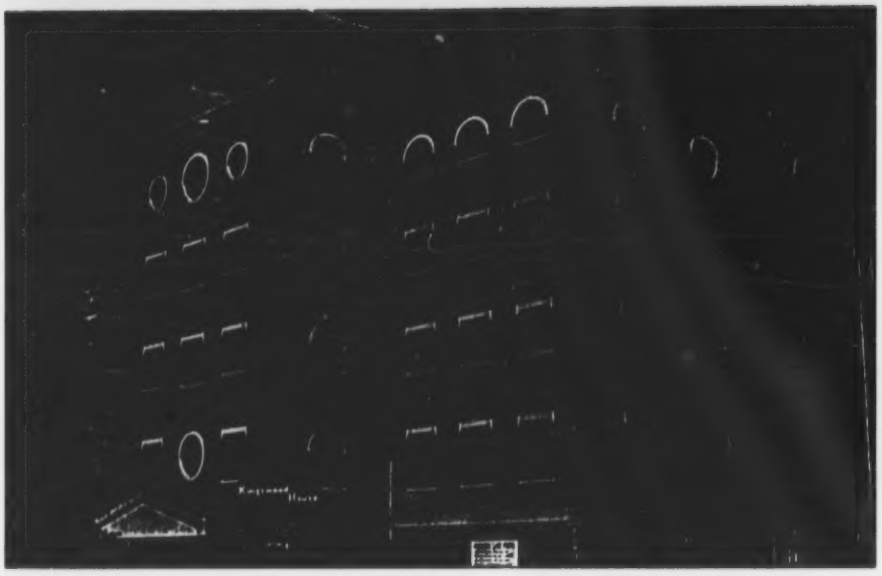
Perhaps the real importance of the initial experiences was the adoption of a 'zero based' approach to accommodation usage and the development of confidence in this strategy as a means of bringing about change expeditiously while tackling practical issues.

Growth and innovation

As a consequence of implementing a range of policies on curriculum, marketing, and financial and personnel management, the college's finances improved significantly, as did student enrolments. This created further pressure on accommodation, but we now had the management capability to undertake more ambitious building development projects as well as a growing financial flexibility to resource them. Growth in student numbers led us to look for under-utilised space. The traditional style college hall, with an adjacent suite of little used music practice spaces, provided us with the opportunity to increase useful learning space significantly and, at the same time, to try out innovations in the way student learning was managed, resourced and supported:

- We were determined to move from the limitations imposed by classroom-sized course groups of students to more flexible arrangements capable of meeting the needs of individual study.
- We wanted to start a process which would encourage students to take more responsibility for their own learning, to develop student-centred as opposed to teacher-centred approaches to the management of learning.
- We were committed to improving study facilities to replace or supplement those in the cramped and inadequate college library.
- We needed to provide generous student access to IT resources.

The proposed conversion of the hall meant that alternative locations were required for staff meetings and exams. We now hire accommodation as required. In the case of exams, moving them out of the busy college working environment was a distinct improvement, both for the exams and the continuing work of the college. For staff meetings, we have been able to hire a venue which will accommodate all our staff. Previously, support staff were not usually invited.



Kingswood House, leased in September 1994 to house new learning centres in business administration, travel and tourism and early years education

Library to learning centres . . .

Out of the hall we created a learning centre on two floors, with 270 study spaces. The new learning centre housed the library stock (and the former library staff), with a network of 80 computer terminals. The dissolution of the library as a separate entity released significant staffing resources, but also released further space for development into a business studies centre with a capacity of a further 150 study spaces, including 40 networked computer workstations. Other resource-based learning centres were established to meet specific curriculum needs, including multi-media studies and microelectronics. These developments were not in themselves sufficient to meet the need for student access to the expanding IT network so we had to keep going.

. . . and IT centres . . .

It was obvious that putting computers in classrooms unsupervised for significant periods in the day and used under the supervision of teaching staff who did not 'own' the equipment or space would lead to problems of maintenance, security and vandalism. It would also be inefficient and inflexible.

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Carnarvon Road learning centre

The computer is not a demonstration model to be put through its paces by the teacher while students watch passively. It is an access point – a gateway – into a new and revolutionary learning medium or virtual intellectual space. The teacher must stand aside – shoulder to shoulder with students rather than eyeball to eyeball.

So we went for the creation of IT centres – at least one on all the significant college sites. We started by combining adjacent classrooms to give a capacity of 50 or 60. When these rapidly proved inadequate, we removed more walls to take in the adjacent corridors and the other rooms opposite, developing centres with a student capacity of between 80 and 110.

. . . and more staff

As student numbers have grown we have recruited more teachers. Students working in scheduled groups in learning and IT centres have teachers assigned to them. However, the learning and IT centres contain many computers, other specialist equipment and software, plus paper-based learning resources of all types. It is not realistic to expect teachers to be familiar with all the operational details of equipment and location of resources in the centres. These resources need expert maintenance, cataloguing and control. The extensive cross-college educational computer network also needs expert management and maintenance.

Additional staff have been appointed and trained for these tasks to support and assist both teachers and students. These staff report to centre managers and are identified with a location rather than groups of students or courses but, nevertheless, directly assist students. Apart from IT systems managers, analysts and programmers, we have learning assistants, technicians and also co-ordinators for specialist learning centres such as travel and tourism or media studies.

Image and style

Another, parallel development during this time related to the associated issues of image, and dealing effectively with people coming into the building from the surrounding town centre environment. The way in which a college treats this threshold is critical and has a major impact on people as they step into the building – and not just on their first visit, though

WELCOME TO
THE COLLEGE OF ARTS & TECHNOLOGY
A NO SMOKING COLLEGE
PLEASE DO NOT SMOKE OR WAIT
BEYOND THIS POINT
VISITORS PLEASE SIGN IN AT RECEPTION

Entrance sign

Plan of learning centre/IT centre, London Road

28

23

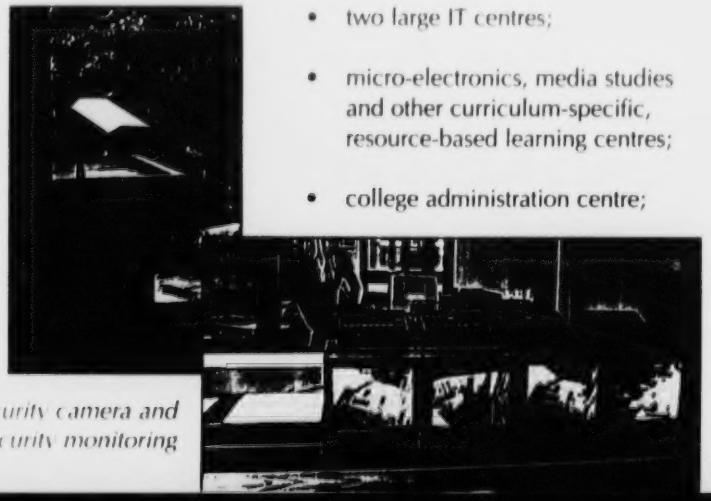
Reception area, London Road Centre

that is particularly important. Overcoming the limitations of the original architecture, we designed and built a smart, colourful, brightly lit, open reception area, surrounded by the threshold services needed. On entering the building, marketing, student services and educational guidance, the college shop, premises office (for site security), enrolment and examination entry services, plus a work-based nursery, could all be accessed immediately.

Security

The key to the improvement in security lies in creating the feel of private space. Our first step was to close three-quarters of the entry routes, to manage and control access to the buildings. This alone resulted in a noticeable improvement in the feeling of security and that the college belonged to its members.

Our second step was to manage the reception areas through staff who feel they own the space and are responsible for it. Helpful and friendly interactions with people as they arrive in the college are just as important in maintaining control over access as more overt security measures. However, video cameras in key locations have led to the near elimination of opportunistic thieves wandering about the college and are invaluable as reassurance to staff in exposed roles as well as to students generally.



Security camera and security monitoring

While these direct strategies work well, we have found that the whole style we have adopted – openness, larger spaces and a quality, managed environment – is equally important and effective in influencing attitudes and behaviour.

Consistency and synergy

Over a period of three years we thus implemented several lines of development which involved conspicuous improvements to the buildings:

- two large generic learning centres;
- two large IT centres;
- micro-electronics, media studies and other curriculum-specific, resource-based learning centres;
- college administration centre;
- large, open plan offices for teaching teams;
- reception and threshold services;
- a work-based nursery;
- two large self-service restaurants.

All of these were designed with consistency of colour themes and styles throughout. The scale of successive projects has tended to get larger and the policy of replacing solid walls with glazed screens has been extended and developed. The total impact has given rise to a synergetic effect, over and above the sum of benefits of each new development. People coming into the college now receive a quite different and much more positive impression. This strongly influences how they work as students, and affects what they say about the college in the local community.

The scale, openness and complexity of the new areas promote informal, accidental meetings between colleagues, encouraging staff to wander around to conduct business in the open rather than behind closed doors. The philosophy is not only to develop a more functional, efficient environment in the inherited buildings, but also to give staff a workplace they will be proud to come to. The buildings should match the professionalism of staff with facilities of the highest quality.

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Finally, there are some practical benefits from style consistency. Instead of treating every project as a new problem, we have a standard model to follow. Even so, we don't always use the same architects or slavishly follow previous designs. One way we can select architects for a project is by judging how accurately their initial proposals pick up the house style and how imaginatively they are able to develop and extend the design themes.

What we want the college to be known for

The transition from one general 'feel' about the college to another was quite sudden – a 'critical mass' effect, deliberately reinforced by other management and organisational development policies. The new style of the college is now consciously:

Entrance to refectory, SEECAFE, Carnarvon Road Centre

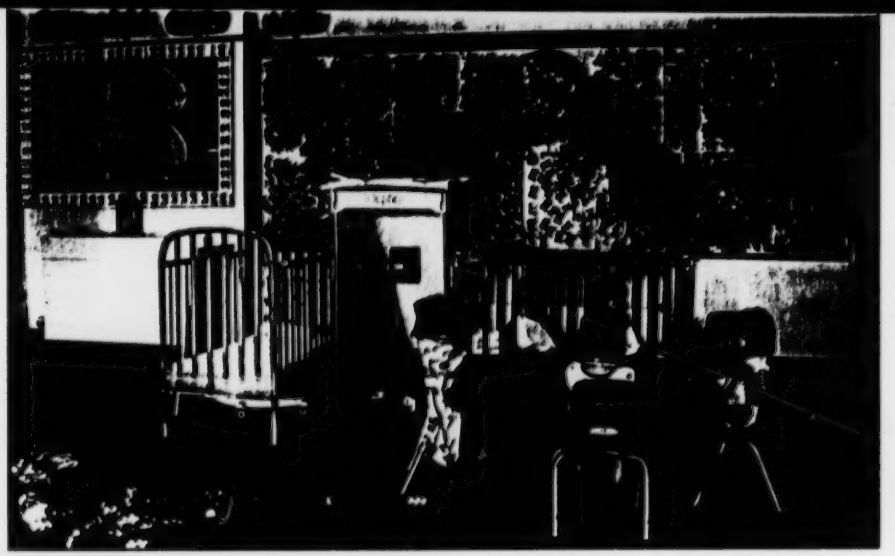
- a work place – purposeful, busy;
- professional, businesslike;
- different from school (and other colleges);
- lively, energetic, open, friendly, safe.

In the process of incrementally improving the standards and functionalism of parts of our existing buildings, we have also – almost by accident – re-defined the type of organisation this college is.

Building blocks

Important features of our built environment are as follows:

- consistent design and style, bright colours, good lighting;
- high standard of furnishings, including near universality of carpets;
- use of large spaces;
- designed complexity of structure and furniture layout;
- removal of walls where possible;
- extensive use of glass screens where walls are necessary;



Workplace crèche – Jungle Cats Nursery

- oversight of corridors and elimination of them if possible;

together with other important features of the cultural environment:

- emphasis on the purposes of the college – to get people qualified;
- assertive management of student behaviour – a place to work;
- assertive management of the environment – cleaning, re-decorating and a firm no-smoking and no-litter policy;

and clarity about what the college is not:

- it is not a social centre, nor a dating agency, nor a branch of the careers service or social services, nor a therapy centre.

Variety of learning methods

The effect on students' experience was also influenced by reaching this critical mass. With the development of many open plan resource-based learning facilities, the locus of learning is moving from the teacher-centred classroom to the learning centres. This in turn alters the relationship between staff and students and, equally noticeably, between staff themselves with more co-operation and team working. Encouraged by these additional benefits, we developed further facilities in the corporate style, including:

- three learning centres for graphic design, 3D design and fashion;

- additional open plan staff offices, releasing smaller staff workrooms for other uses;

- four further learning centres for business administration, travel and tourism, early years education and media.

The emphasis is on making a variety of learning facilities available to each curriculum area, not imposing one standard model across the college to replace a previous 'traditional' model. This increases course team flexibility in designing students' learning experience, using a range of possibilities generated by the variety of physical environments available.

In spite of such extensive development work, the classroom is still a significant component of our stock of learning spaces. However, students are increasingly able to use learning or IT centres to access learning resources and obtain the knowledge related to their course. It means they can also practice their skills in the manipulation, processing and presentation of information. The result will be to release more time for classroom work, which can be used for group discussion or similar teacher-supervised active learning, with less time allocated to passive listening and note-taking.

The student response

Student reaction to the accommodation developments has been overwhelmingly positive and, we believe, has contributed significantly to increasing enrolments, particularly of full-time students in both 16–19 and older age groups. It is full-time students who are, after all, volunteering to spend a substantial proportion of their working week and year at college, perhaps for several years. It would be surprising if they were not responsive to the quality of their working environment.

More subtly, there is a direct link to student attitudes and behaviour. Routine interactions between people in college are noticeably friendly, considerate and open. Levels of vandalism and graffiti have become negligible instead of a persistent minor problem.

Where problems have continued they have usually been located in areas linked with lower morale of particular small groups of staff and it has been possible to identify the real issue and address it. Of course students (and some visitors) are from time to time thoughtless or careless in their behaviour. As general standards of behaviour are high, lapses are conspicuous, particularly in the more open environments. Staff are also more likely to take action to protect what is perceived as being of high quality, and student peer

Plan of IT centre, Carnarvon Road

group pressure plays its part. Staff induction and training routinely includes advice on active management and supervision of the general college environment.

The direct impact on student behaviour in the learning environments is perhaps more significant. Our experience is that the atmosphere in the learning centres is generally purposeful and work orientated. Students are encouraged to work together if they wish, so silence is not a feature – but excessive noise is not generally a problem either. Students come to us with expectations from their previous educational experience. Some, particularly older adults, are initially unhappy and sometimes vocal about the unfamiliar environment. However, for the vast majority the fact that it is conspicuously different from school enables them to make a fresh start and abandon unhelpful baggage. Our student induction programmes include systematic familiarisation activities to enable them to make good use of the learning and IT centres from the start of their course.

Our regular formal surveys of student opinion identify the learning centre environment as highly appreciated. Furthermore, although students have little to say about classrooms, they are strongly critical of inadequate capacity in learning and IT centres. Accommodation surveys also support this rising demand for more capacity. Our surveys show that these centres are always in use during college opening hours and are often full beyond their theoretical capacity. By contrast, the same surveys show that classrooms are often unoccupied and when they are in use they normally have surplus capacity. Experimental opening during vacations and on Saturdays have led to rising demand for learning centre facilities.

The message we are receiving is that students like working in learning centres, volunteer to use them, respect the light supervision of learning advisers, and behave well. On the other hand, students do not volunteer for classroom work, need registering to motivate regular and punctual attendance and require firm supervision. More generally, I conclude that students prefer working in situations where, although supported by staff, they are free to work as they wish. By contrast, students are inclined to avoid situations where what they do is confined and closely controlled by teaching staff.

The future

We have many more projects in the pipeline for improvements to the existing accommodation (e.g. a science learning centre to replace the numerous subject-specific science laboratories). Implementing these projects depends on finances and on maintaining a manageable level of disorder. Not everything can be done at once, if the annual cycles of student recruitment and steady growth are to be continued within the existing building stock. However, it is at the boundary between order and manageable chaos where it is possible to explore new patterns of order and where organisational learning takes place.

By providing more open access learning centres permanently staffed during college business hours we would increase the opportunities for students to study when it suits them best. At the same time, personal contact with professional staff has to be maintained; it is critically important for most of our students. Mode free funding will maximise the student's ability to benefit from increased flexibility in access to learning environments. We still have to address practical issues such as student tracking in open access environments. We need to have an open mind about the proportion of class-sized rooms required in the future. As we are making changes incrementally, this leaves open the opportunity for a change of emphasis if necessary.

> "The computer is a subversive instrument of change which will force us to alter the way we use our buildings and the way we provide education."

Activities in the teacher-directed classroom environment are influenced by what is available elsewhere in college. The direct transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the student (controlling the pace of delivery) will become less dominant while the importance of the teacher in coaching, encouraging, motivating, assessing and organising will become greater. And as we are giving students more control over their learning activities, monitoring of progress will require much greater rigour in scheduling assignments and tutorials, and maintaining records of assessments and progress. Computer systems will assist with some of this. For students the ability to communicate, present ideas and influence others will become more important and developing these skills will be the educational activity which will assume more importance in the relationship between teacher and student.

In the longer term, the computer workstation will become the normal gateway for accessing knowledge as well as the means of exploring concepts, interacting and developing

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understanding. Beyond that, when it becomes straightforward to open this gateway from the computer in the student's home or workplace, our new style of college learning environment might itself become obsolete in due course. Either way the teacher will no longer be the channel through which knowledge is obtained, nor the gatekeeper to college resources.

A revolution in the role of the professional teacher is inescapable and imminent. The current trend for teachers to be increasingly involved in team work will accelerate. Support staff will be important members of these teams. Inevitably, the preparation of materials will become more important but as a product or commodity to be purchased rather than a personally delivered service. So that will be an activity employing fewer people. On the other hand there will be more need for personal support to students; this will be the crucial service for teachers to provide and much of it could be given through less well-qualified learning advisers. How dramatic the effect will be within our management planning horizons is highly speculative. However, we should be alert to the trends.

There is a corresponding, implied revolutionary shift in resourcing of education from labour intensive to capital intensive. We shall spend more of our budgets on providing and maintaining quality professional accommodation, equipment, software and outsourced services and a reduced proportion will be absorbed by direct staff costs. Again, this trend is already with us. The only question is about how quickly it will develop.

Conclusion

The computer is a subversive instrument of change which will force us to alter the way we use our buildings and the way we provide education. If we attempt to use it to reinforce existing learning strategies based on 19th century educational philosophies and practices, the students will eventually reject our services. Managing the existing educational environment to cope with the paradigm shift is a major challenge. It also leads us to have great optimism about the long-term future and strategic importance of FE colleges in the community.

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The open spaces of South East Essex College

Ernest Theodossin

The development of South East Essex College's estate has been designed to change the working environment into something strikingly different from traditional schools and colleges. The result is an openness which individuals cannot easily ignore, and an experience about which few are neutral. As anyone who has worked in a service industry will readily acknowledge, you cannot please all of the people all of the time. A feature which delights one person will almost certainly irritate or offend someone else.

The Carnarvon and London Road Centres have been transformed to different extents. The former, clearly the 'main' building, has seen the more extensive alterations over the past five years, and although London Road was less fully developed in 1994 (work is still continuing) when I talked to staff and students, it too had some significantly modified areas, although not everyone had had an opportunity to use them.

The student experience

I interviewed a group of students and asked them how they felt about working in open spaces. In general openness seemed to be more easily accommodated by younger rather than older students. Among the latter was Tony Smith, who was studying on an Access programme in preparation for taking up a degree course offer from Anglia University. His background includes 13 years in employment and three out of it. Tony felt that working in open spaces was:

> 'a bit daunting. It's not something I've experienced before. You're on show all the time. Adjusting to the space was the hardest part in coming here. It nearly put me off. It's too modern. I have seven lessons per week and two of them are with other classes. It's very hard to concentrate, trying to listen to what they're saying. You can hear bits. If you're concentrating it's not a problem, but you might just overhear something more interesting. You tend to hear the pupils more than the teacher.'

For other mature students the problem doesn't arise. Kier Snelling, doing a BTEC National Diploma in construction, said:

> 'I don't work in so many open spaces. My lessons in London Road are in standard classes, and we have ordinary lessons, like at school.'

But openness has its attractions:

> 'You can see what's going on straightaway'.

Younger students were more consistently positive. Christine Owen had just finished GCE A levels and was doing two media certificates:

> 'It's a lot friendlier than schools. I like the openness and the friendliness. If you're shut in, it's not as nice.'

Others agreed:

> 'I like it a lot. It's a friendly environment. It certainly doesn't bother me. It's good to see what's going on. I don't like London Road.'
> (Sam Delderfield, A level student)

> 'I like it. Revising for exams I

prefer a smaller room, but I like the learning centre.'
(Vanessa Gibson, first year BSc Social Sciences course)

'It's great. In London Road we do graphics in an open plan area and the natural light is useful because you see realistic colours. I'm in a room with three different classes and I find the mixture of first and second years helpful. I wish we'd had the same opportunity last year.'
(Zoe Coleman, second year art and design student)

On the question of the learning centre, students' views were no less varied. One saw it as 'a big improvement' and noise as 'no problem'. Another argued that it is 'too noisy'. Some students use the conveniently situated local library. Only one student I spoke to seemed to have serious reservations:

'It's not up to scratch. Most of the books are in this building [i.e. Carnarvon Road] and you have to wait up to two weeks for books. I tend to study at home.'

Employee perceptions

In some ways staff are in a different position, but not entirely so. Of approximately 370 individuals only something like 50 were there prior to the arrival of the current principal, so the overwhelming majority of employees do not predate the estate developments. Therefore, most staff would have seen at least a part of the transformation by the time they took up appointments and, had they possessed strong enough yearnings for more traditional surroundings, would presumably have turned down the job offers. As might thus be expected, staff reactions to the physical changes seemed to be generally positive. A few staff I interviewed claimed not to have been consulted about the estate development and refurbishment. For many, of course, consultation about the changes would have been impossible because they were not employed at the time when key decisions were taken. Some who were present claimed to have been 'involved' and to 'have helped with bits'. Another observed:

'I was not personally consulted, but there was a working party with two members from each department. We were able to discuss what was right and wrong and encouraged to say what we felt. The principal took the views and made up his mind.'

The Director of Marketing, Lindsey Noble, came in 1991 and so could not have been consulted, but was informed:

'The planning process for the early developments had taken place before I arrived. The downstairs and the reception area were planned during my first six months. I didn't have a radical input. It was clear to me that what was there before was an abomination. At the time I didn't realise the importance of security, for both students and equipment. We don't have security guards yet, but access control to the learning centres is being reviewed and I am being consulted.'

Clare Pearce, the then refectory manager, came in January 1993 and was involved in the transformation:

'At first we had a county council 1960s refectory, with everything shut off and the manager's office at the furthest point. Now we have an open kitchen and customers can see what we're

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Lindsey Noble Clare Pearce

doing. My office is like a goldfish bowl. It does have its downside. I came in with the new management, so it was less of a shock to me.

For staff who've been here for 15 years it was a shock. Training was needed. Older members who couldn't change went of their own accord to schools and county council type situations. On the whole I'm positive. If you're responsible for change, you have to be positive.'

Teaching staff accommodation

Clare's attitude was also fairly typical of the teaching staff I interviewed. Heads of team now share open plan rooms with their staff. For confidential discussion there are glass-walled cubicles in the corners where those involved can retreat, but otherwise everyone occupies desks in large spaces. The abolition of filing cabinets (except occasionally against walls) and display boards prevents anyone shutting themselves off, so all staff can see their professional colleagues and are in turn seen by them. Compared to the typical mess encountered in most college staff rooms, at South East Essex College something approaching general tidiness prevails. Those who remember drabber and duller times appeared to approve of the changes. David Pomfret came in September 1990 and prefers the new look:

'It was dark, dingy, off-putting and not commercially aware. It gave no professional image. Now we've expanded short course provision to industry and what we offer is a suitable image.'

As head of information studies David shares an office with his team:

'I prefer this arrangement, as Head of Team. I'm involved with the team. There's no open door policy because there is no door. Sharing and being there has an effect on the team spirit. I can influence people. The drawback is in terms of confidential talk.'

Jan Hodges is another team head. She arrived in 1987 and is in charge of health and social studies. Jan noted that she has:

'an area where I can speak confidentially, so the desk in the middle of an open area doesn't bother me. I like the openness and brightness. I haven't been in a traditional environment for a while. I'm not sure how I feel about open classrooms because I often teach in fairly conventional rooms.'

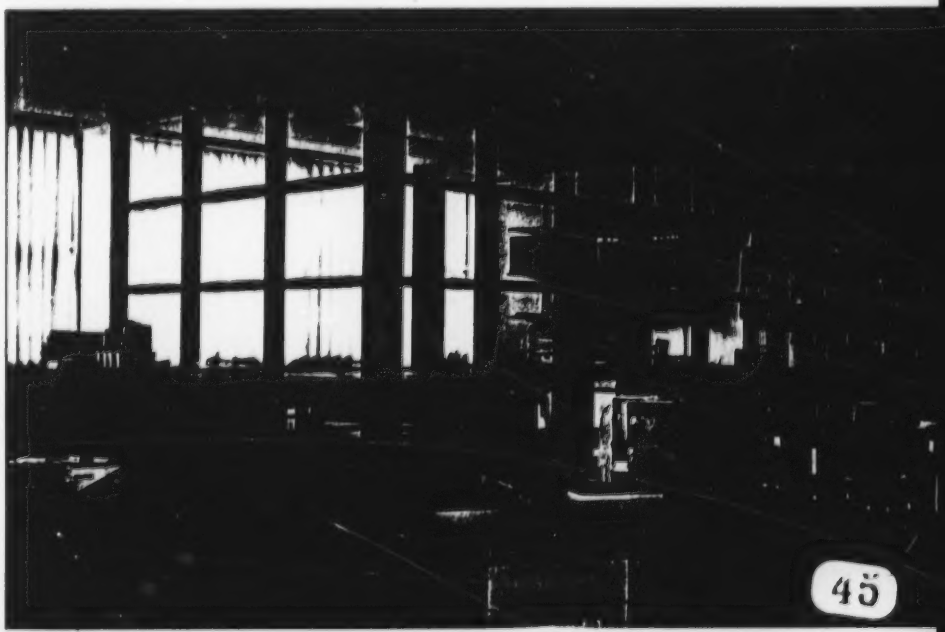
Mike Kempen came to South East Essex College in the late 1970s and is one of the long-serving survivors who has managed to accommodate the changes. As a lecturer in motor vehicle and mechanical engineering he works in a variety of environments, and with a workshop background has 'no problem' with 'teaching a class in an open space'. His attitude to openness:

'depends on what I'm doing. It can be a lovely environment, open, with light carpets on the floor. It's like being a consultant and doing a project.'

There are reservations, however. The openness can be:

'good and not so good. When I

Teaching team room showing corner cubicle



have to concentrate, I have interruptions, but it's generally a nice atmosphere. You're more likely to share information.'

Jenny Probert lectures in health and social studies. She came in 1988 as a part-time member of staff and four years later took up a full-time post. She teaches in all of the college's buildings, but mainly in the Carnarvon Road Centre:

'Although I might have expected to find it difficult because I came from working in an enclosed room, I actually like it. I'm more involved in what's going on.'

Roger Humphrey, a 1993 recruit as a lecturer in media and performing arts, observed:

'It doesn't worry me. It's conducive to team work. You can pick up on what's going on. Music means that one makes noise, so you have to work in enclosed spaces, but there's no difference in an open space. I'm either in a workroom or in the performing arts studio.'

Similar views are held by Perry Horner who worked in the music industry before joining the South East Essex College staff:

'In media and the performing arts the space is a help. You can keep an eye on valuable equipment. Barriers are the worst thing we can have.'

Business support staff accommodation

At South East Essex College, it is not only teaching staff and students who work in open spaces: so do support staff, or 'business support staff' as they are known in an attempt to stress the value of their contribution. Here too staff work in open areas, as they might in most businesses, and the emphasis is on shared work and the promulgation of a team spirit. Vi Shaw arrived at the college before the major transformations and is an executive secretary who reports to the Director of Finance:

'I have moved into a larger space. Initially it was quite noisy, but I like open space. Now I don't notice the noise.'

Karen Wigg is a senior learning adviser who works in the learning centre. She likes the open spaces:

'It's more modern and pleasant. You get to know people more. There is a level of noise, but I don't let people disturb others.'

Lindsey Noble, the Director of Marketing, is a senior manager and is not stationed in a large space, but has what she calls:

'a glass box. In the larger space it can sometimes be more awkward – for example, to make a difficult phone call – but I think I have lost something by leaving the work area. However, I don't tend to spend a great deal of time in my office. I prefer to walk around and involve myself with the work of my team.'

The united colours of South East Essex College

The college has a corporate image at the heart of which are the four chosen colours. These colours have been imposed. The result is a uniformity which renders every vista an unmistakable part of a consistent and integrated whole. Any possible sense of hardness is alleviated by the widespread use of plants which soften the hard lines and generally make sitting areas feel homely and comfortable. In the early days the decorations and the plants aroused considerable opposition, but they now seem to be taken for granted.

How do people 'see' the colours – bright and cheerful, or relentless and regimented? Among the students I interviewed, males seemed either indifferent or uninterested:

'I never thought about it.'

'There's a lot of blue and red.'

'It's a calming influence.'

David Pomfret Ian Hodges Mike Kempen

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'It's cheery in the morning. I feel happy here'.

'It looks smart. I'm not sure it's necessary. I came here because they offer the best course for me'.

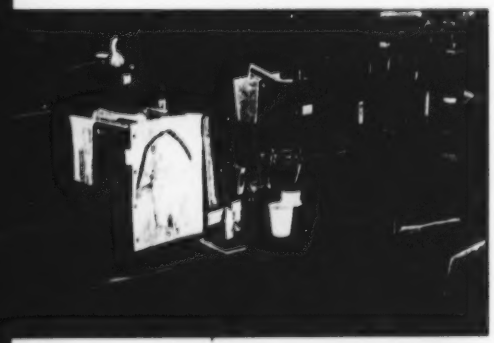
'It's so bland you don't notice, but it does affect behaviour.'

Female students had more sharply focused attitudes:

'I like them. They're bright and cheery. Colleges are usually all grey. It is at Basildon. Very grey.'

'The colours are a bit cold. Green would be better, and a deeper blue. I like the plants.'

'I like them, particularly the white. It's very crisp. There's nothing worse than colourful walls. They're distracting. It helps you to work and to concentrate.'



Teaching staff desk

Fairly similar gender differentiation appeared among staff interviewees. Some males remained unimpressed:

'I have no particular view. It's fairly commercial. In banking everything's always colour co-ordinated. It speaks of one college rather than pockets of different practice in this building.'

Or even unaware:

'I never thought of it before. I don't mind them.'

One had obviously made personal adjustments:

'It has grown on me.'

Another was unmistakably impressed:

'It's conducive to a pleasant environment. I like blue. The white is bright. The red gives a positive feeling.'

Again, females provided more succinct observations, often leaving a distinct impression that, given the choice, they would have preferred different colours:

'They're efficient and business-like, but nothing you would say "wow" about. I would have chosen something more dramatic.'

'It's part of a national trend. Businesses are turning to corporate grey. It's clear but clinical for my area. It looks a bit like an airport lounge.'

'I'm quite pleased with it. I probably would not have chosen these colours. I would have gone for something not quite so vibrant. I would have played it down a bit.'

Perry Horner *Jenny Probert*

No one seemed to oppose them vigorously:

'I like them. They're clean and soothing and not startling. The college was mostly green and brown before.'

One respondent was convinced of the intrinsic value of a corporate image:

'A corporate image is a good idea. The psychological difference is important. People don't realise it's happening, but it is.'

Social engineering

Is there really a psychological difference? Do physical surroundings influence behaviour? In the 1960s and 70s much educational endeavour seemed to be founded on a commitment to social engineering by restructuring: mixed-ability grouping and comprehensive schools would open education's doors to under-achievers and the working class young who traditionally eschewed formal learning. Later researchers showed that it had done no such thing. In the early 1980s Britain seemed always to be at the bottom of international post-compulsory education and training league tables. Increased participation rates have now been rising for some years, but it may well be the recession and scarcity of jobs for young people which is driving the change, and mixed-ability grouping and comprehensivisation have lost much of their golden aura amidst the Government's commitment to the opting out of schools.

However, the notion of restructuring as

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a vehicle for social change remains very much with us in FE: how else can we explain the endless sequence of management reorganisations endured by college staff? In the past decade, how many new principals have taken up their posts without restructuring? How many are on their second or third restructuring? Does it really change behaviour? And what of physical restructuring, such as that undertaken at South East Essex College: it has been promoted as a device for changing the ways in which people think, feel and act. Has it all worked? Certainly Tony Pitcher, the chief executive and prime mover behind the transformation, believed from the beginning that changing the physical environment would modify the way people behaved. He claims that it has. Do the people whom it was intended to impact upon agree? Do the changes actually affect behaviour?

Some of those I interviewed were uncertain. Jan Hodges, for example, had doubts:

> 'I'm not sure. Lots of the college is still traditional. Of course the learning centre is different.'

Others, like Jenny Probert, were less hesitant:

> 'Students behave remarkably well. I had fears when I began teaching, but the college is well organised. I'm not sure how much the physical transformation has changed behaviour. Students probably wouldn't accept it, but I suppose that it has.'

Vi Shaw felt that the refurbishment alone was not the explanation:

> 'It's not so much physical change. It's a nicer college than most, so the students respect it. Also certain policies make a difference. You're not allowed to eat wandering around, for example.'

Vanessa Gibson also saw other possible explanations for improved behaviour:

> 'When this was made a non-smoking college, things became brighter and cleaner. I've not seen one person not listening and adhering. Of course having mature students helps.'

The overwhelming majority of my interviewees, however, were prepared to acknowledge an unmistakable direct link between physical transformation and behavioural modification in the direction of care and responsibility. One obvious indication of proof was the comparative absence of graffiti, an omission noted by Sam Delderfield and David Pomfret. Others – staff and students – also stressed the positive changes which had occurred:

> 'Students are proud of the building and surroundings. In other colleges you get less good vibes.'
> (Roger Humphrey)

> 'People respect the environment now. One Saturday morning when I first joined the college, I found a student in a wheeled typist's chair propelling himself around the reception area. Happily there is no question of this happening now.'
> (Lindsey Noble)

> 'Students know they can't hide away. It encourages better behaviour. People are more relaxed. The place looks like an office rather than a college.'
> (Perry Horner)

> 'It has changed behaviour, not 100 per cent, but the vast majority now respect the environment.'
> (Karen Wigg)

> 'Students reflect the environment. If it's dingy and dark, they think nothing of chucking rubbish on the floor or drawing graffiti on the wall. If it's bright, they're less inclined.'
> (Jacky Chase, Registrar)

> 'We have new tables. People respect them. Everyone used to paint and cut the old tables. Openness stops graffiti. People get involved with one another.'
> (Zoe Coleman)

> 'In the old refectory we had food fights, fights in general and graffiti. In the period January to June we had seven major

The Brasserie, Carnarvon Road Centre

incidents. Since September [when the college refurbished the refectory] we've had nothing.'
(Clare Pearce)

'Money has been spent on the building. It's appreciated. There's no longer graffiti and wilful damage. We used to have that.'
(Mike Kempen)

All work and no play

Part of the explanation for the modified behaviour at South East Essex College must be not merely what has been altered or added, but what has been deleted. There are no common rooms in the traditional sense, either for students or staff. Instead there is a large refectory, SEECAFE, used by both staff and students, and a smaller refectory, the Brasserie, used exclusively by staff. There is also SEESNAX, a staff and student refectory at the London Road Centre. The emphasis is on a work environment. The social dimension is singularly muted. People attend the college to work, not to play.

Apart from the refectories, there is nowhere for people to gather for social purposes. Is there something missing? Student attitudes are varied. Like many mature students, Tony Smith and Paul Griffith (employed by British Gas and doing a part-time two year course in mechanical and production engineering) spend their time in college mainly attending classes, so the social dimension is not important. Kier Snelling has other views:

'The learning centre is used as a student common room, and that's why we're sometimes asked to leave. The refectory is not used in the same way. It would be useful to have a common room. Most students use shops and cafes, but it depends on how much money I've got.'

Christine Owen uses the refectory and the local civic centre for socialising, and Sam Delderfield also uses local cafes. Vanessa Gibson would like a 'common room for mature students' but accepts that 'a common room for the whole college would be difficult'. Zoe Coleman pointed out the difficulties inherent in the present situation:

'It might be good if we had a common room, although there can be friction if you do have one. However, because you cannot eat in classrooms, youngsters loiter around the town. But there's nowhere to go with any atmosphere. We use cafes in town, MacDonalds and the chip shop . . .'

Among other staff, Jenny Probert claimed to 'miss the networking. You met people from other teams. We use the Brasserie now, but it's more formal.' Another, Mike Kempen, noted that 'we have a staff room in London Road. If we didn't, I would miss it.' The London Road staff room has since disappeared. Others – all based at Carnarvon Road – seemed to experience no sense of loss:

'I can barely remember the common room, but it was a grotty dump and is not a loss. It was full of smoke, with ancient, curling posters on the wall.'
(Jan Hodges)

'There's no problem. We use the Brasserie. It's too small for the whole staff, but the way breaks are taken there's no problem. I haven't missed the staff room.'
(David Pomfret)

'I don't miss the staff common room. Others do.'
(Vi Shaw)

'I found the place intimidating at first. I didn't like the atmosphere – it was unfriendly, unwelcoming and exclusive.'
(Lindsey Noble)

'I don't miss it. The Brasserie facilities are excellent. In the common room there were chairs all around the room. It was like an old people's rest room. People sat there staring at each other. The new arrangements are more

Entrance sign to refectory

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modern and adult. It's almost like a bistro.'
(Karen Wigg)

Still other staff, recruited from industry, cannot miss what they have never known:

'This is the first college I've worked in, so I have nothing to compare it with.'
(Perry Horner)

Breaking bread at the same table

Despite the business-like atmosphere and the emphasis upon a work environment, in at least one way South East Essex College resembles a traditional college: staff have the option of using separate dining facilities. The British social class divide survives, and it is reinforced by the naming of parts: staff use the Brasserie – not just for eating but also for small meetings about work over a cup of coffee – and students use SEECAFE. When I have visited comparable colleges in Denmark and Australia, I have found staff and students dining under the same roof, even if they do not always share the same tables – a situation which is, after all, the norm in public restaurants and cafeterias, where menu and pricing may separate but need not exclude.

As the person formerly responsible for running the facilities, Clare Pearce exhibited a certain managerial objectivity:

SEECAFE, student and staff refectory at the Carnarvon Road Centre

'Staff should have a choice, but I encourage staff to use the facilities. With younger staff there's a positive attitude. Actually we sometimes have psychology classes working in the canteen, watching the behaviour of others.'

Who is ultimately responsible for maintaining this choice at South East Essex College is difficult to decide because there are both staff and students who are resolutely against and for sharing. Some individuals seemed uncomfortable with the idea of enforced sharing:

'I don't think the facilities should be shared.'
(Tony Smith)

'We do need separate facilities. Some people aren't quite comfortable sitting next to teachers.'
(Christine Owen)

'I like being separate. I value time on my own. Sometimes you need five or ten minutes without students.'
(Jenny Probert)

'I like separate facilities. It gives both a break from the other.'
(Karen Wigg)

'They should be separate. The Brasserie is used for small meetings. There are no students there.'
(Vi Shaw)

> "We are in the midst of a revolution – and our outdated architectural heritage has to change, just as surely as our lives have changed and are continuing to change."

Others (teaching staff inevitably) want to be able both to share and not share, as considered appropriate:

'We need separate facilities for when you need to discuss things informally.'
(Jacky Chase)

'A lot of staff use SEECAFE. It depends on how familiar the college wants students to be with lecturers. I have no strong thoughts on the matter.'
(Vanessa Gibson)

'We have the best of both worlds.

We can use SEECAFE or the Brasserie. It matters if you don't want students to hear. There is a slight contradiction, the openness of the college and confining ourselves to the Brasserie.'
(Perry Horner)

The latter comment tallies with those who position themselves at the other end of the attitude spectrum. Paul Griffith observed:

'Lecturers might want to get away.'

Others supported the view:

'Staff think separation is good, but they should be together.'
(Sam Delderfield)

'I could cope with the loss of separate staff facilities.'
(Jan Hodges)

'I have no objection to sharing.'
(Mike Kempen)

'I don't want to distance staff. We shouldn't do this in the college. We should be working colleagues. The facilities should be shared.'
(Kier Snelling)

Cost: gains and losses

The South East Essex College transformations have had to be paid for, and that in turn means that other things have not been purchased. The official college calculation is that eight per cent of the annual turnover is spent on the estate – i.e. approximately £1,040,000 per year. A great deal of the funding has come from the College's recent expansion in student numbers. Staffing now accounts for under 60 per cent of gross expenditure The overwhelming majority of teaching staff are now on new contracts.

There have been gains, but there have been losses as well. I informed my interviewees that eight per cent of budget went on the buildings and asked them if they considered this to be money well spent. One group saw the increased estates expenditure as a straightforward good thing:

'We're able to attract additional students.'
(David Pomfret)

'It's been money well spent, although I'm surprised to hear it's so much. The groups are not too large.'
(Tony Smith)

'It has been well spent. It affects the way youngsters work.'
(Christine Owen)

'All businesses have to review expenditure. If staff are happier, you get more out of them.'
(Jacky Chase)

'Money spent on the working environment is always well spent.'
(Karen Wigg)

'There was a need to upgrade. People with cut wages might not agree, but people respect the college a lot more. There's no lack of staff attention. There's always somebody to help.'
(Zoe Coleman)

'Some part-time pay rates were cut, but we're still getting good quality part-time staff. The changes desperately needed doing. The buildings are all part of the outlook and strategy. The developments are reflected in the buildings and they're an integrated part of the philosophy.'
(Jan Hodges)

'The estates expansion programme has certainly allowed us to increase our number of full-time students by more than 130 per cent since 1990, so of course it's been money well spent. Some learning and teaching strategies still have to be worked through in more detail, but on the whole I think it's been very successful.'
(Lindsey Noble)

Entrance to SEESNAX, student and staff refectory at London Road Centre

Another group saw the expenditure in terms of a long-term investment:

> 'In the long run it's well spent. It encourages more people to come in. It produces more revenue.'
> (Vanessa Gibson)

> 'In the long-term it's been well spent. In the short-term managing change causes hiccups. Maybe it could have been staggered. We got the go-ahead at the end of June and we opened the refectory on 4 September. Staffing and systems had to be in place.'
> (Clare Pearce)

> 'In terms of long-term investment it's well spent. There's growth here.'
> (Roger Humphrey)

This latter point was reinforced by an increase of 18 per cent recruitment for the 1994–95 session.

Not everyone was quite so euphoric. The financial impact on staffing was appreciated by both students and college employees:

> 'Well spent? Not if I were a lecturer.'
> (Paul Griffith)

> 'I would prefer it to be spent on staff. Lecturers feel they're being done out of jobs. With student-centred learning you're given a piece of paper and you lose the personal touch. It's getting to be a problem. This year more assignments are written and we're told to go out and do things on our own, although contact is still reasonable.'
> (Paul Griffith)

> 'In some ways it's been well spent. It helps learning, but you need staff.'
> (Sam Delderfield)

> 'It's a contentious issue. There's dissatisfaction with new contracts. In some areas staff morale is low.'
> (Mike Kempen)

SEECAFE, Carnarvon Road Centre

The lessons learnt

Tony Pitcher makes it clear that the South East Essex College estate developments have never been intended wholly or even primarily as a cosmetic exercise, nor even as a fundamental device for social engineering. The transformed college buildings have been adapted to a changing curriculum and to new teaching and learning approaches. In a high-tech, IT world, 'student-centred' and 'self-paced' are key concepts. Walls as barriers have to disappear; networks abound; communication of a range and breadth previously unimagined becomes commonplace. We are in the midst of a revolution – and our outdated architectural heritage has to change, just as surely as our lives have changed and are continuing to change.

I therefore ended all my interviews by encouraging respondents to provide an overall judgement of the estates transformation at South East Essex College: would you advise other colleges to take the same route? What advice would you offer to another college about to make the same changes? I also asked individuals to tell me anything else they either wished to communicate or that they felt I should have asked them about. The answers were somewhat surprising. The staff respondents – whose kind, it could be argued, have paid most heavily for the

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"Openness gives visitors an opportunity to see students in action. It's a good promotional tool."

changes in terms of altered conditions of service and remuneration rates – were extremely positive about the changes:

'Yes. So many changes are hard to isolate one from another. We have the advantages here. Some students say you can tell it's become a business, but I'm not sure they haven't been told.'
(Jenny Probert)

'Yes. There are opportunities for personal development here which I've welcomed. I was in school teaching for 10 years. This organisation is geared up to reality. The college allowed me to finish my MA and gave me time to do it. The college is keen that staff are exposed to IT updating.'
(Roger Humphrey)

'Yes. Part of my job is promoting and training in word processing and computing. That's a good move. It helps to keep us up-to-date.'
(Vi Shaw)

'Yes, but other colleges should think about it carefully. From our point of view it's easier to control the students. It's also easier for them to find us.'
(Karen Wigg)

'Generally, yes. There have been problems. Nobody likes dramatic change. There are staff who've been here a long time and who can't cope. Maybe it's for the good. It's working well here. Openness gives visitors an opportunity to see students in action. It's a good promotional tool.'
(Perry Horner)

'I feel as valuable and important – so do finance, personnel – as teachers. We have similar office facilities and computer technology. We're all using the network. The investment in computer technology is good.'
(Lindsey Noble)

'Staff have better communication. The old heads of department had little contact with staff. The emphasis on status has gone a bit. The organisation is a bit flatter.'
(Jan Hodges)

Some staff simply gave an unequivocal and unelaborated 'yes': they would certainly recommend the South East Essex College route to others. Of course it could be argued that those members of staff whose recommendations would be otherwise might have been somewhat earlier inclined to seek pastures new. Yet those who survived had clearly come to terms with change and recognised its benefits. Those who were more recently recruited had probably been attracted by the visible transformations at the point of entry.

Among students, however, the final judgements seemed somewhat equivocal. There was a small group of (generally younger) enthusiasts:

'Yes, I would urge other colleges to go the same way.'
(Christine Owen)

'I would encourage other colleges.'
(Sam Delderfield)

Other (generally mature) students were less than enthusiastic:

'Nothing social or organised is going on. The college won't allow social science to have its own organisation. There's no notice board specifically for degrees.'
(Vanessa Gibson)

'I wouldn't recommend it. I wouldn't like to sit in a class where you can see everyone going by. I like a room to be like a room, to be solid.'
(Tony Smith)

Kier Snelling Vanessa Gibson Paul Griffith

'I would encourage it so long as it was being done for the right reasons. Not to save money. Not to run the college as a business. There should be a difference between a college and a business. Not to make money. We're supposed to have free education. I wouldn't mind paying more tax for a better education. The future of the country depends on education.

The college image is good. There's an incentive to work and work well. All college literature has a corporate look. The staff are still the same, but most of our work is produced on our own. If they're into decorating they can do my bedroom, if they like.'
(Kier Snelling)

'In my opinion, no. I prefer the traditional method. It's more natural. This college is not geared for mature students. I feel self-directed study involves more time. I have a full-time job and four children.'
(Paul Griffith)

In a service industry, you can't please all of the people all of the time . . .

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